HISTORY OF COPLEY SQUARE

Copley Square, which was to become the leading cultural locus in
Boston during the fourth quarter of the last century, had inauspicious
topographic beginnings. For it was an irregular space at the junction
of two major Back Bay arteries, Boylston and Dartmouth Streets, and of
Huntington Avenue which proceeded diagonally out of town on the north of
the Boston and Providence tracks, as Columbus Avenue ran equally askew
to the south of the tracks. Though major buildings were erected on the
"square" by the mid seventies, it was only in 1883 that the larger triangular
lot, which was originally planned to be built upon, was purchased by the
City and named Copley Square in honor of the great Colonial Boston artist,
John Singleton Copley, and in recognition of the fine arts community
centered around the Square. In 1885 was added the smaller triangle,
known as Trinity Triangle, bounded by Huntington Avenue, Trinity Place,
and St. James Avenue. Though dozens of proposals for the design of the
Square were planned by some of the nation's most distinguished architects
and landscape architects for over five decades, the Square never received
a unified, monumental treatment worthy of its architectural and historic
importance. Almost from the beginning the Square succumbed to the traffic
from trolley cars, carriages, busses and automobiles which either stopped
at the Square, went to the important Back Bay station, or were en route
along this major intown corridor.

Copley Square achieved its significance because of the architecture
and activities that centered around it. Though the rough, filled-in land
was originally planned for the great town houses of the Back Bay, several
of which were built around the Square, the monumental "Coliseums" built
in 1869 and 1872 near the present Sheraton-Plaza Hotel, set the pace for
the development of

the Square.   In these appeared President Grant, Johann Strauss and musical performances featuring an orchestra of one thousand musicians with a chorus of ten thousand singers.   However, the Square achieved significant form and use during the mid seventies through several major buildings. Both Trinity (1872-77,- H. H. Richardson) and the Old South Churches (1875, Cummings and Sears) located on the Square after being forced to move from downtown Boston because of the catastrophic fire of 1872. These were followed by the Museum of Fine Arts (1876; Sturgis and Brigham; formerly on the site of the Sheraton Plaza), which gave meaning to the name of the Square, and the Boston Public Library (1888-95, McKim, Mead and White).

The Chauncy Hall School (1874; demolished 1908) and the Second Church (1872-74, N. J. Bradlee, demolished 1912) once gave a monumental treatment to the north side of the Square while the S. S. Pierce Building (1887-88; S. Edwin Tobey; demolished 1957) once anchored the farther Huntington Avenue corner.   The Sheraton Plaza Hotel (1912-13, Henry J. Hardenbergh; formerly called the Copley Plaza) was one of many of the City's most fashionable hotels and apartment-hotels on, and just off the Square: Hotel Westminister (St. James Avenue and Trinity Place; demolished, 1961), Hotel Brunswick (southeast corner, Boylston and Clarendon Streets; demolished 1956), Hotel Victoria (southeast corner, Dartmouth and Newbury Streets).

Copley Square was the center of the City's cultural activities and its sphere of influence spread around for several blocks.   Foremost was *art* out, with the Museum of Fine Arts on the Square, art galleries for many years along the north of the Square, the Boston Art Club (now Bryant and Stratton), the Massachusetts Normal Art School(southwest corner, Exeter and Newbury), and the recently demolished St. Botolph's Studios

and Trinity Court, where many artists lived; only the galleries and art
supply shops on Newbury and Boylston Streets remain today. Education was
represented by a number of institutions: Chauney Hall School (formerly
on the Square), Harvard Medical School (1883; Ware and Van Brunt; now
Boston University and soon to yield to an extension of the Boston Public
Library), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (from 1866 to 1939 on the
site of the N. E. Mutual Life Insurance Company), Museum of Natural
History (1863, William G. Preston; now Bonwit Teller), Boston Public
Library. Copley Square was a significant focus of religion in the late
nineteenth century because of the three churches originally on it, and the
half dozen within several blocks as well as because of the nationally
known ministry of Trinity Church under Phillip Brooks.(who wrote "O Little
Town of Bethlehem"). Thus within two decades Copley Square had become
the new heart of the City.

Architecturally, Copley Square has two of the acknowledged master-
pieces of American architecture, Richardson's Trinity Church and McKim's
Boston Public Library. These and the New Old South Church are the only
remaining original elements, which were once tightly inter-related. As a
result there is no longer the sense of enclosed space or of architectural
composition. Moreover, the construction of tall buildings around the
Square has both interferred with the sky silhouette of the original
buildings and has made the Square seem to be a depression surrounded by a
high rim of newer structures. For originally the Square was like a plain,
which was stressed by the direct, off-the-street entries rather than the
monumental fight of steps found in public architecture elsewhere.

Trinity Church has always been the focal point of the Square. It is a monumental, richly polychromed, centralized, pyramidal, and sculptured mass set into, rather than at the perimeter of the Square. It is meant to be seen from all sides; thus the parish house is distinctly separated from it and serves to resolve the irregular triangular site. Conversely, the Boston Public Library acts as a wall or lateral space definer. It has always been the keystone of the Square's architectural composition, as well as the gateway, a sort of Roman triumphal arch, to the west. Designed as a foil to Trinity, it is light in color, smooth textured, horizontal; simple in form, neutral in silhouette and planar in surface and mass treatment. Yet the Library blends with Trinity by repeating the motif of arcades over a triple arched portal; however, the Library's portal is on axis with the Square and off axis with Trinity's portal, so as not to conflict. Moreover, the Library originally served as a linking screen facade between the dense, dark, richly polychromed masses of the New Old South Church and the former S. S. Pierce building. The Library is set back considerably from the building line of those buildings to emphasize the western corners of the Square.

The Sheraton Plaza Hotel acts as the southern flank of the Square. Respecting the color, massing and height of the Library, the hotel through its prominent bow front establishes a strong north-south axis as well as carries the eye from Trinity to the Library. Two important relationships on the Square have been lost through time. Once the Second Church on the north side of the Square gave full axial definition north and south. Secondly, a triangular relationship existed among Trinity, South Church and the former Pierce building which was defined by the "point masses" of these structures, (in contrast to the wall facades of the hotel and library), all of which were dark, stone, dense buildings, which had central cupolas.

Several architectural adjustments have been made on the Square to enhance its unity. Noted was the steback of the library. Also, one floor was removed from the Hotel Westminister so that it not dominate Trinity Church. Lastly, while the City allowed the Sheraton Plaza Hotel to project about 12 feet more into the Square than its predecessor, extensive concessions were made at the rear of the lot.

Today Copley Square remains considerably devitalized. Its major architectural compositions have been lost. Accidental vistas cause undesirable space leaks. Major institutions, such as the museums and schools, have left, and their replacements have been commercial activities to the east and west. Lastly the topographic and social environment has changed. A significant design for Copley Square would re-establish it as one of the great squares of the world.